

Relationships in Fiction: An Exploration of Relationships in Short Fiction

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Lucas Miller

Thesis Advisor

Prof. Peter Davis

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 2017

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2017

Relationships in the Field of Religion

An Honors Thesis (1994)

by

James Miller

Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Peter Davis

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2007

Extended Date of Graduation
May 2007

SPC 11
Undergrad
Thesis
L7
2489
.24
2017
1M552

Abstract

The goal of my project was to use the medium of short fiction to explore different types of romantic relationships and the types of issues and dramatic situations that arise from them. I did this by writing three different stories, entitled "The Party," "The Vacation," and "The Bus Trip." These three stories explore the drama that is inherent in relationships in regards to break-ups, financial issues and marital strain, and unplanned pregnancies, respectively. I wanted to use the medium of short fiction to explore different aspects of various relationships.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Peter Davis for being my mentor for this project. I would not have been able to complete this project without him, and I am very thankful for the the assistance he has given me. I would also like to thank Professor Jeff Frawley and Professor Katy Didden for the invaluable feedback they provided for two of the stories that are featured in this thesis.

Abstract

The goal of my project was to use the method of structural analysis to explore different types of romantic relationships and the types of sexual and dramatic situations that arise from them. I did this by writing three different stories entitled "The Fair", "The Vacation", and "The Day After Tomorrow". These stories explore the different types of relationships that are in regards to break-ups, financial issues, and mental health, and are designed to be read as a series of vignettes. I wanted to use the method of structural analysis to explore different aspects of various relationships.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor David for being my mentor for this project. I would not have been able to complete this project without him and I am very thankful for the assistance he has given me. I would also like to thank Professor Jeff Hawley and Professor Kevin O'Connell for the invaluable feedback they provided for two of the stories that are featured in this thesis.

Process Analysis Statement

When I set out to do my thesis, I wanted to explore different situations relating to relationships and romance, as that is where a lot of my interest lies. I had a couple of stories in mind I wanted to work with, but I also wanted to create an entirely new story focusing on a different relationship situation. The process of coming up with the new idea was probably one of the most difficult parts of the thesis.

I knew I wanted to focus on a college-age student, that much I was sure of. I drew inspiration for my new story, "The Party" from my own experiences when coming up with the idea, as is the case with one of my other stories, "The Vacation." With "The Party," I wanted to tell a story about a new relationship forming after an old one had ended. The main character, Martin, ends up going to a party with his friend James, even though he is not all that interested in going. Over the course of the party, he is pressured to drink by his peers, but resists, until he bumps into his ex, who broke up with him a couple of months ago. She reveals the reason why she broke up with him, and becomes so distraught that he winds up drinking, even though he didn't want to. This story certainly took an interesting turn while I was writing it, as the relationship elements sort of took a backseat to the themes of societal pressure and sticking to your ideals. The relationship element is certainly still a part of it, but it becomes more of a catalyst for the larger theme of the story to reveal itself. One of the toughest elements of this story for me was the sort of climax of the story, where the protagonist is having a conversation with a girl at the party he had hit it off with later. It is after she discovers he has been drinking, and I used this conversation to really bring out the themes of resisting peer pressure and sticking to one's ideals in the story. It took me a long time to figure out what exactly I wanted the characters to say, as the conversation could have gone many different ways, and focused on a

number of different aspects. It was a challenge for me to discover what I wanted the crux of their conversation to be, and, after a lot of deliberation and rewriting, I ended up going with the idea of not sacrificing one's ideals based on what their peers think. This was a big moment in the story, and I wanted to make sure I got the crux of the issue right within it.

Another very challenging aspect of the thesis was making large edits to an already-completed story I wrote called "The Bus Trip." It was a story I had written and workshopped in an earlier class, and the workshop yielded a lot of good advice for aspects of the story to change. I implemented a lot of these into the revised version, and I'm happy (and very surprised) by the results. Revising the story was an interesting experience, because the story went in a wildly different direction than what I had first envisioned. The original ending was very upbeat, and didn't have much in the way of drama. I received feedback that everything seemed to wrap up far too neatly at the end of the story. In trying to implement this feedback into my story, I ended up taking the story in a new direction that is, in my opinion, a lot more interesting and nuanced. The story focuses on a married couple who take a trip to the store in order to buy a pregnancy test, and the wife is afraid of being pregnant, since she doesn't want kids. Whereas the original ending had the test being negative and the husband being totally accepting and supportive of that, the revised ending made him feign happiness for her sake when the negative result was actually very disappointing for him. This made the husband a bit more of an interesting character, as he decides to put aside his own happiness for his wife's happiness. He must now come to terms with that, and whether or not he will is left ambiguous at the end of the story. With this shift in the ending, the story became about much more than just dealing with the possible repercussions of an unplanned pregnancy. The story really became about sacrificing one's happiness for a loved

one, and the lengths that someone will go to do that. I was very intrigued by this new direction, and I'm glad that I was able to add a layer of ambiguity and drama to the story's ending.

Finally, the final story of my thesis, "The Vacation," was one that didn't require much work in the way of editing. This was a story that I workshopped for an earlier class and heavily revised in order to turn in for the final portfolio for the class. I was very happy with the level of polish in the story, as well as the content of it. I still went through and edited the story for errors, and it wasn't perfect. There were a few words I changed here and there, and one instance where I had to completely rewrite a sentence, as I had forgotten to actually finish the sentence. Overall, this story was the one I had to put the least work into because it was already in a really good place when I decided I wanted to use it for my thesis. As a result, there wasn't much behind the process here, but I'm really happy with how this story turned out, as well.

The Party

"Come on, man, lighten up. Tonight's gonna be fun," James said, giving me a hard slap on the shoulder. We hadn't even reached the party yet, and I could tell he was already tipsy.

"Whatever you say," I said, watching the tiny wisps of air escape from my mouth as I spoke. I was already having *so much fun* freezing my ass off. I looked around at the houses lining the street. I could've sworn we had passed by them a few times already. I shot James a quizzical look. "Are you sure you know where we're going?"

"Relax, Martin! Of course I do," he said. "Quit worrying so much." He stopped walking and looked over at me, his face suddenly serious. "Just leave everything to me, buddy. I'm gonna make this the best night of your life. You're in good hands." He continued walking, and almost immediately tripped on a cracked piece of sidewalk. I rushed over to him.

"Shit, you okay?" I asked, holding out my hand.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, as he grabbed it and pulled himself up. "It'll take more than that to ruin this night. Come on, we're almost there!" He suddenly quickened his pace, taking a left onto another street. I shook my head and followed after him.

As we turned onto the street, the low hum of loud music reached my ears. James' face lit up. "See, we're almost there! I told you I knew where it was!" he said, practically running on ahead toward the source of the commotion.

"Hey, watch out! I don't want you falling again!" I called after him, but he was already too far ahead. I quickened my pace once again until I had finally caught up with him.

The music got louder as we got closer and closer to the house where the party was. I could see it clearly now, a modest, quaint house with chipped white paint and green shutters. A

few people stood huddled around outside, chatting and laughing. One guy sat on the stone staircase leading to the door, clutching a bottle of beer in his hands. He called out to us as we approached the house.

“Hey guys, you here for the party?” he asked.

“You know it, man! Woo!” James shouted, pumping his fist in the air. I simply nodded.

“Alright, well you guys have fun tonight!” He took a swig of beer. “But not too much fun!” A nervous feeling crept into my stomach as we made our way up the stairs. James stopped before opening the door and looked over at me.

“You okay, man? You look a little down. Come on, relax! We’re at a party! It’ll be fun” he said, giving me a reassuring thumbs-up. I tried my best to get in the mood, but I couldn’t. I backed away from the door.

“I—I don’t know about this, James. Maybe I should just go home. Go on in without me, I’ll head back,” I said, and started to turn around.

“Martin, come on! What are you so worried about?” he asked.

“Look, parties aren’t really my thing, you know? Plus, I’ve got some homework to do, and—,”

“This is about Rachel, isn’t it?” he asked, frowning. My gaze dropped to the floor, and I slowly nodded. James let out a long sigh. “Listen. I get that she broke your heart, and I know you feel like what you two had was special, and you’ll never find another girl like her again.” I nodded. “I know this because you’ve told me like eighteen thousand times.”

“Hey, that’s not tr—,” I started to protest, but James shushed me.

“Look, man. I’m gonna let you in on a little secret,” James said, dropping his voice low. “Forget about her, man. You don’t need her!” He motioned toward the house. “Dude, we’re at a party! There must be over a hundred girls in there! And, knowing you, you’ve got a chance with, like, at least five of them.”

“Wow. Thanks,” I said, staring daggers at him.

“Okay, fine, ten. Look, the point is, you need to stop moping around and start moving on.” As much as I hated to admit it, he *did* have a point. “So let’s go in there and have some fun, okay?” A blast of cold air blew by, making me shiver in the darkness, even with my coat.

“Fine,” I said, “but only because it’s so cold out here.” James’ smile returned instantaneously.

“Alright, let’s do it!” he roared, giving me another slap on the shoulder. We made our way up the stairs once again, and James opened the door to the house. I was immediately greeted by a rush of warm air and a deafening cacophony of cheers, chatter, and electronic dance music. James went inside and I shuffled along behind him. We found ourselves in the foyer, and after a short walk we made our way into the living room.

There were people everywhere. People sitting on chairs, the couch, the floor—wherever they could find a seat. A sea of bodies had congregated around the kitchen, but the living room was still cramped with partygoers. My head was pounding from all the noise, but I was determined to make the best of the night.

“So, what now?” I said, turning towards James, but he was nowhere to be found. I let out a sigh and crept past a couple drunk people making out. So much for being in good hands. I made my way over to a faded leather chair with an ottoman in front of it and sat down. My body

sank down into it a little, but at least it was better than being out in the cold. I pulled out my phone and checked the time. It was 11:40 PM. I wondered how long James would want to stay out and hoped we wouldn't be out too late.

"Found you!" the familiar sound of James' voice reached me through the noise. I looked up to see James walking over toward me, a bottle of beer cradled in each fist. He held one out to me. "Here, I got you this."

"No thanks, man. I don't really feel like drinking tonight," I said. "Thanks, though." The disappointment was etched onto James' face.

"Aw, come on, man. Live a little! It's just one beer. You'll be fine!" I shook my head.

"Seriously, man. I'll pass," I said, frowning. Finally, James relented.

"Suit yourself. Let me know if you change your mind, though. I'll hook you up," he said, taking a swig of one of the bottles. "So, are you gonna just sit there all night, or are we gonna actually do something?" I looked around at the chaos unfolding around me.

"Um, what exactly are we supposed to do?" A mischievous smile crossed James' face.

"Come on, let's go talk to some of the lovely ladies around here, eh?"

"Sure, I guess," I said, pulling myself out of the chair. James and I made our way through the crowd in the living room and into the kitchen. Somehow the crowd of people was even thicker here. The stream of people formed a haphazard drunken line, all heading toward the back of the kitchen by the sink. There were three coolers, each stocked with bottles of beer. Half-empty bottles of whiskey, rum, and other types of alcohol sat on the counter. In the corner of the kitchen, a lone girl knocked back a shot.

"I know that girl over there. She's pretty cool. Let's go talk to her," James said, ushering me over as he made his way toward her. One was blonde and the other was a brunette, and they were both rather drunk already.

"Hey, James!" the blonde called out as we approached.

"Hey! You look like you're having fun tonight!" James said, beaming.

"Definitely!" the blonde girl said, hoisting up the empty shot glass. She put it down on the counter. James threw a glance over toward me.

"This is my friend, Martin." The blonde girl looked over me and smiled.

"Nice to meet you, Martin! I'm Courtney," she said.

"Um, nice to meet you," I said. James smiled and put his arm around my shoulder.

"Martin here's never been to a party before, so I thought we could show him how it's done!" he said, drawing out the last word dramatically.

"WHAT?!!" Courtney squealed, looking over at me. "No way!"

"Yeah," I said, a sheepish smile spreading across my face. "James here finally convinced me to come." Sam looked over at me and smiled.

"Well, we need to celebrate, then! Come on, have a drink!" She pulled another shot glass from the cabinet, and poured out a shot before I could protest.

"Um, no thanks, I'm good," I said. Courtney's smile faded, and a look of disappointment took its place.

"You're at a party and you won't even drink? Where's the fun in that?"

“Hey, it’s fine, man, I’ve got this one,” James said, taking the shot from her. Courtney and Sam cheered and each poured themselves another shot. I let out a sigh and slinked back toward the living room. As I looked around at the crowd of partygoers, I was reminded just how out of place I felt. I shot another glance toward James, who was still chatting away with Courtney. He was completely oblivious to the fact that I was even gone.

I made my way over to the chair I was sitting in earlier. I pulled out my phone and started absentmindedly playing with it. A couple minutes passed before an unfamiliar voice finally pulled me from my stupor.

“Having fun over here all by yourself?” I looked up to see a gorgeous girl staring down at me. She had long, brown hair that fell to her shoulders, and her eyes were green with flecks of blue. I quickly shoved my phone into my pocket.

“Uh, yeah. I- I’m fine.” The girl gave me an incredulous look.

“Are you sure?” I nodded.

“Alright, then. You want something to drink?”

“No, thanks. I’m not really interested in drinking any alcohol tonight.”

“We’ve got soda here, too, if you’d rather have that.” After a moment, I nodded.

“Sure, that sounds good.” The girl smiled and pointed at my coat. “I could go put that up for you, too, if you’d like.”

“Oh, sure! Thanks.” I stood up and took off my coat before handing it to her.

“I’ll be back in a sec,” she said, and walked away. A couple minutes later, she returned with two cans of root beer.

"Hope this works for you," she said holding it out to me.

"This is great. Thanks," I said. I grabbed the can and opened it up before taking a drink.

"No problem," she said, before opening her own can. "I'm Emily."

"Martin." Emily took a swig from her can and stared at it for a second before looking at mine.

"So, do you just not like the taste of alcohol, or what?" Emily asked, taking a seat on the ottoman.

"I dunno. I've never really had any before," I said. "Does it really matter?"

"No, not at all. I was just curious. It's a bit surprising to find someone who isn't drinking at all, especially at a party," she said. "Wait, you are over twenty-one, right?" I nodded.

"My twenty-first birthday was a few months ago. I didn't even drink then, either. I guess I've just seen what drinking does to some people. It can really bring out the worst in them. I guess I don't want to be that person, you know?" Emily nodded, and a bit of color rushed to her cheeks.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," she said. She was silent for a moment before she finally spoke again. "Well, I'm glad you're sticking to your guns, especially at a place like this. You don't go out partying much, do you?" I let out a chuckle.

"God, no. This is my first one, actually. I'm here with a friend." Emily stared out into the chattering crowd of people.

"Is that so? Well, where are they, then?"

"Last I saw him, he was in the kitchen with a couple of girls."

"Wow. He sounds like a really great friend," she said sarcastically, shaking her head.

Just then, I saw James working his way through the crowd.

"Oh, there he is now, actually," I said, pointing him out as he approached. He stumbled a bit as he made his way toward us.

"Oh, God, don't tell me..." Emily said, cupping her face in her palm. James' face lit up as soon as he noticed Emily sitting on the ottoman.

"Heeeey, Emily! I just got done chatting with Courtney for a bit. I was wondering whether I'd see you tonight!" I looked from him to her, then back again.

"Wait, you two know each other, too?" I asked. Emily nodded.

"It's no surprise this guy left you here alone."

"Um, ow!" James said, feigning offense. He looked over at me. "And besides, I didn't leave you here alone. If anything, you left me alone." Emily looked over at me expectantly.

"I plead the fifth," I said, with a grin. Emily smiled back as she got up off the ottoman.

"Well, if you guys will excuse me, I've got a house full of people to attend to, since I'm sure Courtney is probably drunk off her ass right now," she said, shooting a glance over toward James. "You helped with that, I'm sure." James looked over at her and shrugged.

"Um, I plead the fifth, too!" Emily just rolled her eyes at him before turning her attention toward me. "It was nice meeting you, Martin," she said. She pointed over at James. "If this guy really does abandon you, come find me. I'd love to talk some more!"

"Will do," I said, smiling. I watched her walk out into the chaos of the party. When I looked back toward James, he was beaming.

"Dude, she was totally into you!"

"What? No way," I said. He nodded his head vigorously and clapped his hand around my shoulder again. He was obviously drunk.

"Yeah, she was. You should go talk to her some more. Emily's a really cool person. You gotta move on, remember? This is your chance, man!"

"You're right," I said, nodding. I stood up, and James' smile grew even wider.

"Want to get some drinks in you first?" he asked.

"What? No. I don't need any."

"Aw, come on, man! It's liquid courage!" I shook my head and held up my can of root beer.

"I'm fine with this. Besides, I think you've had enough for the both of us at this point," I said.

"Nah, man! I'm still totally fine! You go look for Emily. I'm gonna go get another beer," James said, and stumbled toward the kitchen. I shook my head and headed off to go find Emily. The crowd finally seemed to have dissipated a bit, and I wondered if the party was winding down. I ambled my way past a few scattered drunk people and finally made it back to the foyer where we had first entered the house. My phone buzzed in my pocket and pulled it out to check it. I had gotten a text from James wishing me luck. At least, I thought it's what it said. The words

were nearly incomprehensible. I smiled and continued walking, keeping my eyes trained on my phone. Suddenly, somebody bumped into me, causing me to spill my root beer all over my shirt.

“Oh shit, I’m s-sorry,” the person said, her words slurred. My heart skipped a beat. I’d recognize that voice anywhere. I looked up to see none other than Rachel Banks, the girl who had broken my heart two months earlier, staring at me. “Wait, Martin?”

“Oh, h-hey, Rachel,” I said, finding it hard to put together a single rational thought.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t think I’d ever find you at one of these things,” she said.

“Um, James kinda dragged me along,” I said sheepishly. Her eyes drifted down to the now-empty can of root beer, the contents of which were now all over my shirt. Her lips curled into a slight frown.

“Oh. Makes sense,” she said. I wondered what the hell that was supposed to mean. Suddenly, some guy I’d never seen before walked up next to her and smiled.

“Finally caught up to you,” he said. He looked over at me, then bac at Rachel. “Babe, who’s this?” he asked. My heart broke all over again as soon as he uttered the word ‘babe.’ Rachel quickly shushed him. She glared at him for a moment before turning back toward me.

“Oh, Martin, this is David. David, Martin.” She turned back toward David. “Come on, let’s go,” she said, trying to get David to come with her. He ignored her and kept his attention focused on me.

“Nice to meet you, man,” he said with a smile, extending his hand.

"You, too," I said flatly, and left his outstretched hand hanging in the air. He quickly withdrew it.

"So, uh, how do you two know each other?" he asked nonchalantly. Rachel shot him a look like she was going to murder him. Anger welled up inside me.

"Well, we used to be together, until she broke up with me, and wouldn't even bother telling me why," I said coldly. David eyes widened, and he went completely silent. Rachel looked like she was about to explode.

"Oh, grow up, Martin! You want to know why I broke up with you? Because you're fucking boring, okay?!" She was screaming at this point, and everyone nearby was staring at us. "You wouldn't know what fun is if it bit you in the ass. I'm sure it was like pulling teeth for James to get you to come here, and I bet you're probably hating every second of it, aren't you?" I didn't say a word, just stared at her. "Am I wrong?!" I couldn't get myself to respond. She turned back toward David. "Come on, let's go." She left without another word, David following close behind. I just stood there, still in shock from what had just occurred.

"Dude, are you okay? I heard it all. Th-that was rough, man," I heard James say. He was hardly coherent at this point. I shook my head slowly. "H-hey, you know what? Fuck her, man. She's wrong." I stared at the floor. Rachel's words kept racing through my mind, making it hard to focus on anything else. I looked at my now-soaked shirt and the empty can of root beer in my hand. I crushed it in my fist before turning toward James.

"Fuck it. I want a drink." James stared at me, dumbfounded.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Let's have some fun tonight," I said. James cheered.

"Alright, let's do this!" We both headed back toward the kitchen. "What do you want to drink, man?" I looked over towards James and shrugged.

"Surprise me, I guess," I said. James walked over to where Courtney was standing. He started to talk to her, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. I saw her smile and pull a glass out of the cabinet. She poured some whiskey and Coke into the glass and brought it over to me.

"Here you go!" she said, holding the glass out to me. I grabbed it and stared at it for a second, giving the contents a quick sniff. It smelled kind of awful. "Go on, drink it!"

I brought the glass up to my lips and took a swig. The Coke hardly masked the whiskey, and it tasted awful. I sputtered and coughed a bit, but I got it down. I smacked my lips a couple times, trying hard to mask my displeasure. James just laughed.

"It's okay, man. It goes down easier the more you drink."

"Whatever you say," I said, as I brought the glass to my lips again. I took another drink, but it didn't go down any easier the second time. I broke out into another coughing fit, which made James laugh even harder. I looked over and saw Emily walking toward us. When she saw the drink in my hand, she looked surprised and a little disappointed.

"H-hey, Emily, what's up?" I said, trying to play it cool. She looked over at James and Courtney.

"Did you guys put him up to this?" she asked.

"Nope. He decided he wanted a drink, so we gave him one," James said. "Relax Emily, we're just having some fun." She turned toward me.

"Can I talk to you alone for a bit?" she asked. I nodded and followed her through the living room and out of the house. The chilly night air hit me like a truck. The people that were outside earlier had either left or retreated into the house to escape the cold. We were all alone in the darkness.

"Did something happen in there?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You seemed pretty dead-set on not drinking earlier," she said.

"I'm just having some fun, like James said. What's the big deal?" Emily frowned.

"Are you really, though? See, James getting plastered? That's par for the course. Courtney, too. But from what we talked about earlier, you didn't seem like you wanted any alcohol. I just want to make sure this is what you want. I thought they might have pressured you into drinking or something." I was silent for a moment.

"I didn't do it because of them," I mumbled.

"What?"

"I said, I didn't do it because of James or Courtney."

"So, something did happen?" I let out a long, drawn out sigh before finally nodding.

"A little bit after you left, I, um, wanted to talk some more, so I went to come find you."

Emily was listening intently, and I saw a small smile crept onto her face at that moment.

"Anyway, I was gonna go look around the house for you when I ran into my ex. As soon as I saw her, I just kept thinking about the breakup, which fucking hurt, but I tried not to let it get to me."

Emily didn't say anything, just nodded. "Anyway, we talked for a bit, and she introduced me to

her new boyfriend, and I just couldn't handle it. I snapped at her, and she went off on me. Just fucking exploded. Said she broke up with me because I'm boring, that I don't know how to have fun. It just—it really got to me.”

“Is she right?” Emily asked.

“What? Of course not. I know how to have fun, it's just...”

“It's not her idea of fun,” she said. I nodded.

“And there's nothing wrong with that.”

“I know, but it's not just her,” I said, looking back at the house. “Everyone else is enjoying themselves, so what exactly is it that I'm missing here?”

“You're not missing anything. It's okay if you're not enjoying yourself. It doesn't matter what your ex, or anyone else thinks. If parties aren't your thing, don't try and force it, okay?”

“Alright. Thanks, by the way,” I said.

“No problem. By the way, what was it that you actually wanted to talk to me about? You said you went to come find me before you ran into your ex.” I felt my cheeks start to burn.

“Oh, um, I guess I just wanted to get to know you better, since we didn't get to talk much earlier,” I said.

“I think I'd like that,” Emily said smiling. “Anyway, we should probably get back inside. I don't feel comfortable leaving Courtney in charge for too long.” We headed back into the house and returned to the kitchen, where James was leaning against the counter. James smiled when he saw me.

"Hey, man! Still want your drink?" he asked, holding the whiskey and Coke out to me. I shook my head.

"Nah, I'm fine. Where'd Courtney go?" James shrugged.

"I think she went to bed," he said, taking a sip of my drink. I watched as a group of people headed out the door and into the night. I pulled out my phone and checked the time. It was a little after 1 A.M.

"Speaking of that, I'm getting pretty tired, too. I think I should probably head home," I said.

"That's cool. I'll walk home with you," James said, stumbling his way over to me.

"Yeah, you're not going anywhere, James," Emily said, frowning. James put up his finger like he was about to protest, but simply slumped to the floor and groaned.

"That's fair," James said. Emily turned and looked at me.

"You'll be able to make it back home, right?" I nodded. "Good. I'll go grab your coat for you." After she walked off, James looked up at me.

"You doing okay?" he asked. He looked like he was liable to fall asleep at any moment.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm just worn out. You should probably get some sleep, too."

"Probably. Hey, I hope you had a good time tonight." I looked over and saw Emily coming towards us from the foyer with my coat.

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"Here's to moving on, right?" James asked. Just then, Emily walked up and handed me my coat.

"Here you go!" she said. "I'll walk you out."

"Alright, thanks," I said. I looked down at James, who was still sitting on the floor. His eyes were closed.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure he's asleep," Emily said. She started to make her way to the foyer, and I followed close behind her. When we got to the door, she turned to me. "Make sure you make it home okay."

"I'll be fine," I said. "Thanks for everything tonight. Take care of James for me"

"Don't worry. He's in good hands," she said, smiling. She opened the door for me, letting a gust of cold air in. I grimaced as I stepped out into the night.

"Have a good night, Emily. It was nice meeting you!" I turned and started to walk out toward the road.

"You, too!" she called. "By the way, check your coat pocket!" I felt inside it and found a small slip of paper inside. I walked under the orange glow of a streetlight and read the note. It said: "Let me know if you'd like to go out sometime. I'd love to keep talking!" Her phone number was scrawled beneath the message. I smiled and tucked the note back into my pocket. I took one last look back at the house, but the door was shut, and Emily was nowhere to be found.

"Here's to moving on," I said, and started to make my way back home.

The Vacation

The sky was dark by the time we reached finally reached the cabin we would be staying in for the weekend. After what seemed like hours of driving past the endless stream of tourist traps sprinkled throughout Gatlinburg, Tennessee – from the overpriced gift shops to the “affordable” time shares – we had finally made it. Jagged spires of rock dusted in the fresh snowfall of winter surrounded our tiny car, and among them, our destination – Angler Mountain. The road that led up the mountain was steep, and the slick snow that was piled on the road didn't make me feel any safer. I took my time as I rounded each perilous curve, careful not to scratch the immaculate paint job of our rental car. I looked over at my wife, Alice, who was sleeping soundly in the passenger seat, the seat belt wrapped snugly across her chest. I drove with the radio turned down low as not to disturb her, admittedly thankful that I would no longer had to suffer from the endless parade of pop songs she loved so much.

After driving up a number of inclines so steep that I was sure we would slide off the road and fall to our doom at every turn, the cabin was finally in sight, a small two-story A-frame cabin. A thin layer of snow atop its brown, shingled roof, and even more snow was collected in long, rectangular mounds that sat piled against the cabin's wooden walls, sloughed off by a combination of strong winds and the steep angle of the architecture. A couple of plump pine trees surrounded the cabin, their furrowed needles glazed with ice and snow. I parked the car on the tiny graveled driveway before turned it off. My wife stirred as the roar of the engine died, leaving only the sound of the wind blowing around outside the small vehicle.

“Honey, wake up,” I said quietly as I undid my seat belt. “We're here.” I reached over and gently tapped her left shoulder to wake her up. She opened her eyes slowly, and blinked them a few times to dispel the haze of sleep.

"Oh. That's great," she said, stifling a yawn. She opened the door and clambered out of the car. I followed suit, and was immediately met with a chilling gust of cold air and snow that went up to my ankles.

"Come on. Let's hurry and get our things inside, it's freezing out here," I said. I trudged to the trunk of the car and opened it up. Our luggage was sitting inside, no worse for wear after the long drive. Hers was a gargantuan pink suitcase, filled to the brim with enough clothes and makeup to dress about ten of her, while mine was a smaller, blue case filled with enough clothing for the trip and nothing more. "Here. I'll get yours," I said, as I picked up the neon monstrosity. She grabbed mine, and we both trudged through the snow to the door of the cabin as the biting wind buffeted our faces. I set her bag down and quickly unlocked the door and we stumbled through the doorway and into the interior of the cabin. I flipped on the lights, and a soft yellow glow flooded the living room. It was cavernous, and a draft ran through the large space. The west side of the room had a small kitchenette attached, with a dining table and two chairs nearby. Directly in front of us was a cracked leather couch, which sat in front of a huge fireplace. A large stack of firewood with a lighter on top sat next to the fireplace, in case we wanted to light a fire. There was a staircase leading to the second floor, which was devoted entirely to the master bedroom and bathroom.

"Well, here we are," I said. "I know it's a little rough, but we'll make it work." I looked over at Alice, and I could see the disappointment etched onto her face.

"Wow. What a great place. I'm going to bed," she said, her voice as cold as the chilly mountain air outside. Her eyes never left me as she dropped my suitcase on the faded wooden floor. The case hit the floor with a dull thud. I tried to set hers down gently, but the overstuffed case opened up as soon as it hit the floor, spilling its contents all over the place. I knelt down and

tried to help Alice collect her things, but she rushed over and shooed me away. She shoved her clothes back into the suitcase and laid it on the ground. When she rose, she had a purple nightgown clutched in one hand, and her toothpaste and toothbrush in the other. She stormed over to the bathroom and slammed the door behind her, while I slumped down onto the couch and sighed.

I wanted to surprise her. She had always told me she wanted to vacation in the mountains, but we could never seem to find enough money. I decided to give her the trip she had always wanted, no matter what. I squirreled away part of each paycheck, saving little by little, until I finally had enough to rent this place out for a couple days, along with a little extra. Nothing seemed to be going right, though, and Alice sure didn't seem happy. I wasn't going to let that stop me, though. I was determined to turn things around.

The sound of the bathroom door opening roused me from my stupor. Alice stood in the doorway with her arms hanging limply at her sides. Her phone was clutched in her right hand. She looked absolutely gorgeous in her purple nightgown, her long blonde hair falling down past her shoulders.

"You look beautiful, as always," I said, smiling at my wife of two years. I thought I saw a small smile creep across her face, but it was only for a second. She suddenly turned and headed up the stairs. I heard a scream as she reached the top, and raced up after her.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" I asked as I stormed into the room.

"John, what the hell is that?" she asked, pointing toward the bed. Or, more specifically, the massive painting that hung over the bed. It was a strikingly realistic painting of a golden retriever. Its fur was lifelike and shiny, and its eyes seemed to radiate an all-knowing wisdom. Its

tongue lolled joyfully out of his mouth, which was curved ever so slightly so that it looked like it was smiling. The best part of the piece, though, was the dog's outfit. A tiny set of spectacles rested on the dog's nose, and an ornate jeweled crown sat atop its head. Somehow, it had managed to wrap his paw around a golden scepter, which had been lovingly topped with a golden bone. A placard under the painting read, "Lord Barkley III". It was a perfect picture of royalty, and the cheap gilded frame only added to the effect. It was truly a work of art, but Alice was certainly not amused. I tried in vain to suppress my own enjoyment of the garish painting, and began to laugh hysterically. Alice turned to me and glared.

"Well, at least one of us is enjoying this," she said.

"The site sure wasn't lying when it boasted of the unique artwork here. Come on, honey. You have to admit, it's a pretty great painting," I said, chuckling.

"Ugh, no. It's creepy. Now I have to try and sleep with this thing staring at me all night," she said, shaking her head. "What kind of idiot would even paint something like this?"

"I don't know, but if this painting is anything is anything to go by, their painting career must have been pretty--," I paused for emphasis, "--ruff!" Alice groaned, and I started laughing – I couldn't help myself.

"God, you are such a dork," she said, rolling her eyes. I saw the faintest hint of a smile creep across her face. Soon enough, she was laughing as well. Eventually, we both calmed down enough to sleep. She got under the covers while I made my way back downstairs and got ready for bed. When I reached the bedroom, I turned off the lights and climbed into bed after her. The huge quilt was surprisingly soft and warm, which was a blessing. She turned away from me and moved to the other side of the bed. It was her nightly ritual, one that had been going on for a

while now. I didn't even bother trying to move any closer to her anymore. The sound of her breathing mingled with the shrill whistle of the wind outside.

"Goodnight, Alice," I said, and turned away from her.

"Goodnight," she said, after a few moments. It was more than I usually got.

Things weren't always like this. We met four years ago, in college. We were both juniors in the same math class, and I'd always ask her for advice because it was my worst subject. I still didn't get it even after she'd tried to explain it over and over, so eventually I just gave up and started to make small talk. We hit it off from there, and somehow things just managed to work out. We started dating, and I asked her to marry me the day after graduation. She said yes. We both immediately got jobs after college, and we looked forward to building a life together.

Things were going well for a while, until a few months ago, when she lost her job. It was a pretty big hit to our finances, and I worked overtime to try and make up the difference. Things were finally start to look up again, but she still wasn't happy. I thought maybe this trip would help her relax, but I'm not sure now. Maybe I'm wrong, and it will. God, I hope I'm wrong. I turned and looked over at Alice. She had already fallen asleep. I tried to stop my brain from constantly running, and eventually fell asleep along with her.

When I got up the next morning, she was already awake. The sunlight streamed through the windows, blinding me. I crept downstairs and found her sitting at the kitchen table, a cup clutched in her hand. Her wedding band glinted in the morning sun. From the looks of it, she had already showered, and was ready to start her day.

"Morning, gorgeous," I said, with as much cheer as I could muster. "Did you sleep okay last night?" She nodded, but she still looked tired.

"I found coffee," she said, pointing to the coffee maker over on the counter. "Thank God for caffeine." I took another mug from the cabinet and poured a cup for myself. It was the color of burnt caramel. I sat down at the table across from her and started to drink. It was bitter as hell, but at least it was hot.

"So, is there anything you'd like to do today?" I asked. She shook her head slowly. I decided to press her further. "Nothing at all? If you want to just take a day and relax here, that's fine, too. I'm not in any hurry." She stared at me for a second, sipping her coffee.

"John, what are we doing out here?" she asked flatly as she gently placed the cup of coffee on the table. She was frowning.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, why did you bring me all the way out here?" She didn't look at all happy to be here. I said nothing, just stared down into the depths of my coffee cup.

Her words reverberated through my skull, whirling around in my brain like a plastic bag in a gale. *Why were we here?* I thought about what happened last night, and how unhappy she seemed. The whole trip so far had been one disappointment after another for her, and I couldn't help but think that it was all my fault. I was doing all of this for her, but none of it seemed to matter. I looked back at Alice, who was still staring at me expectantly, waiting for my answer. There had to be some way to break through to her. Light streamed in through the windows, bathing the table, Alice, everything, in gold. In that instant, an idea came to me. I stood up and grabbed my coffee cup.

"Come on," I said, "Let's go." Alice looked confused, but she got up anyway, her hand still clutched around her mug. I grabbed her hand and led her out of the cabin and into the morning light.

My jaw dropped as soon as we arrived outside. The light of day revealed the beauty that had been obscured by the dark and snow of the previous night. Snowflakes drifted gently through the air, adding to the massive carpet of white that was draped across the ground. We were surrounded by other mountains, their rocky peaks capped with snow. Here and there, bunches of trees fought their way out of the stone and powder, their green needles wet with melting frost. The golden sun sat suspended in the air over the little cabin, its light blazing across the blue-gray sky. The heat from the coffee mug warmed my trembling hands in the frigid cold of the morning. Wisps of breath escaped from my mouth with every exhale as I took in the view. We were completely and utterly alone up here on this mountain. We wouldn't have to bother with work, or stress, or money for an entire weekend. I looked out at the spectacular vista laid out before us and saw endless possibilities. In that moment, I felt that anything was possible. I felt confident that would be able to fix the void that had formed between us. Whatever the reason we had become so distant lately, we could overcome it together. *That* was why we were here. I pulled myself from my thoughts and looked over at Alice. She said nothing, but she was finally smiling.

"Wow, it really is gorgeous here," she said, after a while. I nodded in agreement.

"Definitely," I said. We stood there and admired the view for a bit longer. Alice was shivering despite the sun's warmth. I crept around behind her and wrapped her in an embrace in an attempt to warm her up. I figured she would pull away, but she didn't. Instead, she took another sip from her coffee cup. Suddenly, a look of displeasure crossed her face. She was silent for a bit, staring into her own cup. She gently shook the cup of coffee and watched as the brown

liquid sloshed around at the bottom of the mug, then poured it out onto the ground. The brown liquid stained the pure white of the snow, and the resulting puddle vaguely resembled urine. Suddenly, Alice started to laugh. It was quiet at first, nothing more than a chuckle, but pretty soon, the sounds of her laughter poured outward and danced among the faraway peaks. I quickly pulled away from her, confused.

“What’s wrong? Why are you laughing?” I asked. She was practically crying at this point.

“Because,” she said, struggling to keep her composure, “this coffee tastes like piss, and now it looks like it, too.” I looked over at her and smiled. Another idea struck me just then.

“Hey, how about we go get some coffee that doesn’t suck? There’s nothing better to do here, anyway.” She smiled and pulled away from me.

“Sure,” she said, peering down at the brown puddle in the snow. “Anything has to be better than this. “Come on, let’s go!” She grabbed my arm and started to pull me toward the car, but I wriggled my way out of her grip and stopped her.

“Hold on, I’m not ready yet! I need to shower first, then we can leave.” Alice groaned, and her smile deflated.

“Alright, fine. Make it a quick one. I don’t want you taking forever like you always do,” she said.

“Oh, come on. I always shower as fast as I can,”

“Alright, fine. Could you just hurry, please?!” I nodded, then made my way back to the cabin. I took a shower, and when I emerged from the bathroom thirty-five minutes later, I found

Alice slumped over the side of the couch. "I asked you to hurry up. That was not a quick shower." I shook my head in frustration.

"Alice, I don't know what you want from me," I said, the anger rising in my voice. "Why do you always get so upset about this?" Alice looked like she was about to explode at me, but she stopped and took a deep breath and sighed.

"Well, you don't see me taking forever in the shower. I asked you to hurry up, and you still took your time." I was quiet for a bit. She had a point. I've always taken a long time to get ready in the morning, even before we were together. This time was no different. Lately, though, the little things have been much more of an issue.

"You're right. I'm sorry. Come on, let's go get some coffee." Alice jumped up and practically dragged me out of the cabin and into the car. Soon enough, we were traversing the mountain roads once again, only this time from the opposite direction. As the old saying goes, slow and steady keeps you from sliding off the road and plummeting to your death. Eventually, we made it to the bottom of the mountain. There was a general store that sold basic goods like milk, bread, and, of course, coffee, all at oh-so convenient and exorbitant prices. I drove right past it.

"They probably have coffee for sale back there," Alice said, turning to me. I shook my head and kept my eyes glued to the road.

"How about we go to Starbucks instead? I'm tired of sucky coffee." Alice looked unsure.

"I don't know. Maybe we should just get the coffee back there. I don't know if going all the way to Starbucks will be worth it."

“Nonsense. We’re on vacation. Let’s splurge a bit!” Alice was quiet for a bit, then nodded slowly. “Alright, fine.”

We ended up driving for about an hour to get to the nearest Starbucks, because we were evidently farther away from civilization than either of us realized. Alice was thrilled when we finally pulled into the parking lot. I was just glad to be out of the car, if only for a bit. We walked into the store and ordered food and drinks. I ordered a grande coffee with cream, and a bagel. Alice ordered a tall plain coffee, which was strange. It was one of the cheapest drinks on the menu. She usually ordered some huge drink with a nearly-unpronounceable name. We sat down at a table and started to drink. She didn’t look very happy.

“Don’t you usually order something else?” I asked. She quit drinking and looked up at me.

“Yeah,” she said, cringing with every sip. “I just wanted to try something different this time.”

“Well, you don’t really look like you’re enjoying it very much. If you want to get something else, it’s fine. We can just—“

“I’m fine!” she snapped. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Alright,” I said. “I just want to make sure you’re happy.” She nodded and continued to drink. I wasn’t about to press the issue any further. My eyes were drawn to one of the small televisions mounted to the wall. One of those annoying emergency weather broadcasts that always interrupt the show you actually want to watch came on. A major snowstorm was going to hit in the area we were staying at tonight. The man on the screen warned everyone to take shelter, stock up on the essentials, all of that fun stuff. I pointed it out to Alice, and she started to

get really worried. She's never liked storms ever since she was little. The sound of the wind always creeped her out. After we finished our coffees, we decided to head to a nearby store and pick up some supplies. The store was full of hundreds of people who had the same idea as we did, but thankfully we were able to find what we needed. We picked up some extra blankets, a couple flashlights, and some extra food and water. Alice looked even more stressed out as we rang up all the items, and she only seemed to worsen as we drove back to the cabin.

The sun had begun to sink in the sky by the time we made it back there. The snow was coming down pretty heavily as we carried all the supplies indoors. I checked my phone for weather updates, and things didn't look good. We were supposed to get about a foot of snow, along with strong winds. The weather from last night would be nothing compared to the storm we were about to face.

I closed and locked the door behind me only to find Alice huddled on the couch under a blanket. Her face was nearly as white as the giant flakes that poured from the sky. I sat down next to her and put my hand on hers. She was trembling. The wind howled outside, and the windows of the cabin rattled on their hinges.

"I don't want to be here anymore," Alice said, her voice barely a whisper.

"We'll be okay," I said, though even I have to admit, it was pretty rough out there. "Do you want to try to sleep?" She nodded. "Alright, then let's go upsta--" I was interrupted by all the lights in the cabin shutting off at once. Alice screamed. I squeezed her hand gently and coaxed her up. She didn't move an inch from where she was standing.

"Go get a flashlight, so we can see where we're going," she said. I slowly made my way over to the bag of supplies and grabbed the two flashlights. I handed her one and kept the other,

turning it on. The beam of light pierced the darkness, but it wasn't exactly comforting. The cabin looked eerie in the darkness, and the howling wind certainly didn't help. We made our way over to the stairwell. "I need to get ready for bed," she said, and walked over to her suitcase. She rooted around in it by the light of the flashlight, and finally procured another nightgown. This one was pink. I went over to my case and grabbed pajamas, as well. I walked over to the bathroom, and found her waiting by the door.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Sorry, this is really stupid, but I don't want to be in there alone, with the storm and all." she said, clearly uncomfortable. She clutched her nightgown in a death grip.

"No, that's not stupid at all," I said, "I know how much you hate storms."

We both stepped into the bathroom, and I shut the door behind us. I could hear Alice's breathing even over the howling of the wind outside. I watched as she changed, taking each garment off one by one, then neatly folding them up and placing them on the floor. She shivered in the darkness as the wind continued to howl outside.

"Don't worry. It might sound bad out there, but these walls are sturdy," I said. "We're totally safe." I knocked on the wall, and the wind somehow managed to get louder. "See? Completely and utterly safe." Alice practically threw on her nightgown and rushed out of the bathroom. We made our way up the stairs and opened the door to the bedroom. The flashlight beams cut through the darkness of the room, and I saw the face of Lord Barkley staring back at us.

"That thing is even creepier in the darkness," Alice said. I scoffed.

"No way! If anything, that painting is a good luck charm!"

"Oh, really?" Alice asked, incredulous. I smiled at her.

"Yup! As long as Lord Barkley is here to protect us, there's no way anything bad can happen to us." Alice rolled her eyes at me, but there was a smile on her face.

"Alright, whatever you say." She flipped off the flashlight and burrowed under the covers. I flipped off my own light and joined her. I waited for her to perform her nightly ritual and move toward the other side of the bed, but she never did. She settled down right next to me under the massive quilt.

"Goodnight, John," Alice said. I was stunned.

"Goodnight," I said, and kissed her lightly on the cheek, then settled back onto my own pillow. I stared up at the painting of Lord Barkley and smiled, even as the wind continued to batter the rickety walls of the old cabin.

"John? John! Wake up," Alice said, her voice filled with panic. I sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

"Hmmm? What's wrong?" I asked. Her eyes were wide, and she was already fully dressed.

"It snowed so much last night! There's no way we'll be able to go anywhere" she said, her voice filled with panic. "We're stuck here, John!" I tried my best to calm her down.

"Relax. It'll be okay. Let me get dressed, and then I'll take a look." Alice nodded.

“So much for your good luck charm,” she said bitterly, eyeing the painting hanging above the bed. After quickly showering and getting dressed, I stepped out of the bathroom to find Alice sitting on the couch, somehow managing to look bored and alarmed at the same time.

“The power’s still out,” she said glumly. I went over to the door and opened it up. Absolutely everything was covered in white snow. I stepped out of the doorway and trudged into the snow, which came up to my knees. Alice was right, there was no way we were going anywhere. The mountaintop was bathed in the golden yellow light of the sun, and I felt its heat wash over me. I pulled out my phone and checked the temperature. Thankfully, it was about 50 degrees, so maybe some of the snow would start melting soon. Either way, we were going to be stuck here. I stepped back inside and shut the door. Alice stared at me expectantly.

“Well, you’re right. We’re stuck here, but it’s not too cold out. Maybe some of the snow will melt if we’re lucky. We should probably call someone and let them know that we’re snowed in,” I said. Alice sighed and started to pull out her phone, but I stopped her. “No, it’s okay. I can handle it.”

I looked up the number and dialed the company line. After a few rings, a young man answered the phone, his voice thick with cheer.

“Hello, this is Glen, with Smoky Mountain Cabin Rentals! How may I help you today?”

“Hi. My name is John Parker. My wife and I are staying at the cabin on Angler Mountain, and we’re sort of stuck here. Our car’s snowed in and the power is out, too. Is there some way you can help us out?” Glen answered almost instantaneously.

“Oh, dear. I’m so sorry to hear that, John,” Glen said, his voice thick with manufactured concern. “Well, rest assured, we know about the storm, and we’ve got our best people cleaning up the mountain paths. All that pesky snow will be gone before you know it!”

“Do you know exactly when that should be?” I asked, growing impatient with his perkiness.

“Well, I assure you they are working as hard as they can, John. Everything should be all cleared up by nightfall,” Glen said. I frowned.

“Okay, but what about the power? Do you know when that will come back on?”

“Unfortunately, John, I’m not sure when we’ll be able to get your power back on. But don’t forget, you have a nice big fireplace that’ll provide plenty of light and keep you warm and toasty tonight!” Glen was really starting to annoy me.

“Alright, well thanks for your help,” I said.

“You’re very welcome!” Glen said. “I hope you two make a lot of happy memories during the rest of your stay at our luxurious cabi—,” I hung up the phone and shoved it back into my pocket with a sigh.

“Well? What did they say?” Alice asked.

“We’re going to be stuck here all day, and they won’t be able to get the power back on, either. We’ll still be able to get a fire going tonight, though, so we’ll be okay,” I said. Alice frowned and sank into the couch.

“Well, that’s just great,” she said, with a sigh.

"Yeah, this really sucks," I said. "I guess we won't be making any happy memories after all." She looked over at me with a puzzled look.

"What?"

"The guy I talked to said that he hoped we would make a lot of happy memories during the rest of our stay in our luxurious cabin," I said, doing my best to emulate Glen's manufactured pep. Alice took a look around at the old cabin and a smile crept across her face.

"Yes, we truly are living in the lap of luxury," she said, and started to laugh. I joined her and pretty soon we were both back in high spirits.

"So, what should we do?" I asked.

"I don't know. Let's see if there's anything to do in here," she said, shrugging. We poked around the cabin and found Risk and Monopoly sitting in the closet. Of course we had two of the longest board games in the universe to pass the time with. We sat down to play a game of Monopoly, and were deep into the game when I noticed that Alice didn't seem to be having fun anymore. She seemed distant as she gazed at the stack of colorful money she held in her hand. She put down her money and stared at me.

"We probably shouldn't have taken this trip," she said finally.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Is this about the cabin? I'm sorry I couldn't get anything better." Alice sighed.

"That's exactly the point, John! We can't afford this! You work so much as it is, and this is only going to make things worse."

"I brought us here so that we could relax! You always said you wanted to go to the mountains. I made sure we had enough money for the trip, so you don't have to worry about it."

"Okay, but what about after we go home? Then what? I'm tired of living paycheck to paycheck, John. Running away from our problems isn't going to magically make them all disappear!"

"You think I don't know that? Look, everything's going to be fine. I know you've been looking for work ever since things fell through at your old job, and I know you'll find something, eventually. Things might be kind of hard until then, but we'll make it through this, okay?"

"Alright," she said, and nodded. "Sorry for snapping at you. I guess I haven't really been relaxing much here, huh?"

"Well, that's why we're here," I said. "Come on, let's get back to the game." We continued to play board games for the rest of the day. She was the undisputed Monopoly champion, but I beat her at Risk. Eventually, night fell, and the roads were still layered with a thick blanket of snow. The temperatures had plummeted without the warmth of the sun, and, even with the extra blankets, we were both still shivering. I grabbed a flashlight and got up to try and get a fire going in the fireplace.

"So much for having the snow cleared by nightfall," Alice grumbled.

"Don't worry. Surely, they'll have it cleared by morning," I said, as I grabbed logs and threw them into the fireplace. "They'd better, anyway. We have to leave tomorrow." Alice nodded, the glow of the flashlight illuminating her face. I stared at the lonely stack of logs in the fireplace. "Damn. We're going to need some kindling."

"Isn't there any newspaper or something around here we could use?" Alice asked. We looked around for a few minutes, but we came up empty-handed. My heart sank. We couldn't even light a fire, for God's sake. So much for being all warm and toasty, Glen.

"I'm sorry. Do you want to just grab all these extra blankets and head to bed?" I asked.

"Sure, I guess. So much for finally being able to relax, though."

"I'm really sorry, Alice. This whole vacation has been a total disaster. Between the storm, and the useless staff, I guess we really would have been better off staying at home. I guess Lord Barkley the Third wasn't much of a good luck charm after all, huh?" Alice was silent for a few seconds, then her eyes grew wide. Her gaze floated up toward the bedroom.

"Wait here," she said, and raced up the stairs. A few seconds later, I heard a commotion coming from above me. I heard a huge thump coming from upstairs, and pretty soon, Alice was coming down the stairs with the huge painting in tow. "Looks like Lord Barkley here is good for something, after all," she said as she lugged the canvas over to me and dropped it. It hit the ground with a thud. "We can use this as kindling, right?"

"Well, I suppose that would work, but should we really be doing this?" I asked.

"John, there is nothing in this world that would make me happier in this moment than burning this stupid dog painting. You told me not to worry? Well, this is me not worrying. If that guy on the phone wants us to make some happy memories, then, dammit, let's make some." I nodded and got up from the couch, and we both set to work taking the picture out of its gilded frame. After that was done, I looked around and thankfully found a pair of scissors in one of the drawers. I held them out to Alice, and she grabbed them and started slicing the canvas up with reckless abandon. She had a huge smile on her face as she cut the canvas into long strips, then

cut those strips in half, so that pretty soon, we had a nice little pile of kindling. I threw them into the fireplace and lit the pile, and eventually, we had a roaring fire going. The flames gave off a lovely orange glow as the strips of canvas sizzled and smoldered. The logs popped and glowed, throwing up little embers that danced around in the air. I was grateful for the warmth, and, judging by Alice's face, she was, too. What we didn't count on though, was the horrible smell that the burning paint gave off.

"Well, I'm definitely warm. But now it smells awful in here," she said, crinkling her nose. "It was still worth it, though." She looked at the pile of burning canvas in the fireplace. "Plus, I'm really glad that eyesore is gone now."

"Yeah, at least we won't die of hypothermia now," I said. I smiled and nudged Alice with my elbow. "Hey, it looks like Lord Barkley's become a real *hot dog*, am I right?" Alice didn't say anything, just shook her head ever so slightly and closed her eyes.

"Goodnight, John," she said quietly. "And thanks. I'm glad we came here after all--" Her voice trailed off at the end as she gave in to sleep. I smiled and I watched the flames die down until there was nothing left in the fireplace but a pile of ash and a few glowing embers. I got up and gently moved Alice to a comfortable sleeping position, then laid a couple blankets over her.

"Goodnight, Alice," I whispered, and crept up the stairs and into the bedroom. I was fast asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

When I came downstairs the next morning, Alice was still sleeping soundly on the couch. I went over to the window, and was happy to see that the road had been cleared sometime during the night, and the workers had even cleared the snow from the driveway so that we could get the car out. The power still hadn't been turned on, but at least we would be able to leave on time. I

showered and got ready for the day, then woke Alice up and waited for her to do the same. Soon enough, we were ready to head out. We grabbed all of our things and headed outside. I locked the door behind us, and we moved our things into the car. The sun was shining, and the mountain vista was as beautiful as ever.

“Come on, let’s go,” Alice said as she opened the passenger door and got inside. I got in on the driver’s side and turned the car on. We sat in silence for a moment. Alice turned to face me. “I think I’ve had enough of the mountains for one lifetime. Next time, we should definitely go to the beach.” I smiled and shot one last glance back at the cabin, thinking of the now-empty spot above the bed where the painting of Lord Barkley the Third had been. My mind drifted back to last night, and how happy Alice had been as we sat in front of the fire. In a way, the painting had been a good luck charm, after all. I hoped that our good luck would last just a little bit longer, and that things would be easier from here on out.

“Well, first we have to get off this mountain without dying,” I said, but my words were already being drowned out by pop music. I shook my head and smiled, then started down the mountain path, slow and steady.

The Bus Trip

"Come on, let's get this over with," my wife, Julie, said sourly over the mechanical roar of the bus engine. The bus driver hardly paid any attention to us as we boarded the vehicle. Rain poured from the gray sky outside, pelting the metallic roof with a steady stream of falling drops.

"Oh, come on. Cheer up. It'll just be a quick trip to the store, and then we can go home," I said. I followed close behind Julie as she clambered past rows of passengers crammed into the seats on either side of the bus. The bus doors behind us slammed shut with a sharp, metallic hiss.

"Good, because the sooner we get off this bus, the better," Julie grumbled, gripping her purse tightly. She carefully sidled around a person holding onto the pole in the aisle. "You know how much I hate riding on these things."

"I know, I know. Just try and relax. We'll be there before you know it," I said. We both arrived at the tail-end of the crowded bus. Luckily, there were still a few empty seats left. Julie sat down and let out a heavy sigh. I plopped down next to her and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. A smiling young woman sat a couple seats down from us, clutching her infant to her chest. The child was absolutely adorable, and its wandering eyes were filled with wonder as it surveyed its surroundings. I turned to Julie.

"Look at that baby down there. Don't you think it's cute?" Julie looked over at the mother and child.

"Yeah, it's really cute," she said, but she didn't sound very enthusiastic.

"That could be you, you know. You'd make a great mother," I said, smiling. She gave me a quick nod, then turned to look out at the rain. The bus lurched forward and started to move down the road. I glanced around at the other passengers. Some stared absentmindedly out the

windows, while others were glued to their phones, or tapping their feet to some unknown song. The baby, seemingly agitated by the sudden movement of the bus, let out a few shrill cries. The mother gently hummed a tune while rocking the baby back and forth, and, soon enough, he calmed down. The bus rolled gently through the city streets. I glanced outside the window and noticed that the sky was growing darker, and the rain seemed to be coming down harder. I looked over at Julie, who looked to be completely lost in her thoughts.

“You okay?” I asked. She broke out of her reverie and looked over at me.

“Yeah, I’m fine. God, I wish we could just take the car. Do you know when we’ll be able to get it back from the shop?”

“The mechanic said it should be done in a couple days.” Julie groaned.

“Ugh, I wish we did not have to deal with this right now.”

“Whatever happens, we’ll make it work,” I said. “We’re almost at the store.”

Suddenly, a huge thunderbolt struck outside, and the resulting boom sounded like a cannon shot. All the passengers looked up in surprise, and a couple people screamed. Beside us, the baby started to whimper. The mother frantically tried to calm him down, but it was no use. Soon, the baby’s whimpering turned to loud crying and, his shrill screams reverberated throughout the cramped quarters of the bus. I looked around at the various reactions from the other passengers. Some of them were visibly annoyed, but others really didn’t seem to care much. Beside me, Julie was grimacing, and had her fingers pressed to her temples. Glanced over at the mother, who was still trying desperately to calm the baby down.

"I'm so sorry. He's not usually like this," she said over the din of her child's agitated cries. The child's screams mingled with the pouring rain and booming thunderclaps of the storm outside, creating a blistering cacophony that would be a constant companion throughout the rest of the ride. I was grateful when the bus started to slow down.

"Finally," Julie said, looking relieved when it finally rolled to a stop. A smile crept onto her face as the doors opened.

"Don't get too excited. Now we have to go out in that," I said, motioning toward the storm that was still raging outside. The rain was coming down in heavy sheets, and lightning streaked across the sky. Thunderbolts sounded off intermittently, causing the bus to shake slightly. Julie frowned. We both stood up and followed the throng of passengers as they slowly filed out of the bus. We quickly ducked under the awning of the bus stop, but we were already soaked. I looked over at Julie, who looked miserable. I couldn't blame her. I wasn't particularly happy, either.

"Any chance we can wait this out?" she asked, looking up at the rain as it buffeted the glass ceiling above us. I shook my head.

"I think we're just going to have to make a run for it," I said. Julie let out a long, drawn out sigh.

"Fine. Let's do this," she said, and ran out into the storm. I followed close behind as she headed toward the store, which was mercifully close by. The rain continued its assault as we dashed across the parking lot. The howling wind whistled in my ears as I ran. Julie practically dove through the automatic doors before they even had a chance to open all the way. I crossed the threshold myself shortly after she did, and we both took a moment to catch her breath. We

were both soaked through to the skin, and tiny drops of water fell from our clothing. Julie frowned. "Come on. Let's get what we came for."

As we walked through the store, I noticed that Julie looked more and more nervous the closer we got to our destination. We eventually made it to the pharmacy section, and I scanned the aisles until I found the one we were looking for.

"Here they are," I said, going down the aisle that housed the home pregnancy test kits. Julie followed close behind me. I scanned the shelves, which were lined with all kinds of pink and purple boxes.

"Wow, there are so many different kinds. Do you think it matters which one we get?" I asked, but Julie didn't respond. She stared at the sea of tiny boxes with a glazed look in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"What? No," she said, breaking out of her stupor. "I don't think it matters that much. Any of these will probably work just fine." She kept staring at the tests without picking one out. After about a minute, I grabbed the cheapest one from off the shelf.

"Here, let's just get this one," I said, holding it up. She nodded without saying anything. I started to walk toward to make my way toward the cash register, but she didn't move. I stopped and looked back at her.

"Honey what's wrong?" I asked. Julie frowned and stared at the floor for a moment. She sighed and looked back up at me.

"I'm nervous. What if this test comes back positive?"

"What do you mean?"

"Paul, I don't want to have a child." My heart sank as soon as she said the words.

"We talked about this, though. You said--,"

"I said I'd think about it, Paul. And I have." Her gaze drifted to the floor again. "I don't want to be a mother." I was silent for a moment.

"You'd be great at it, though. I'm sure of it," I said. Julie glared at me.

"I don't care about that!" she snapped. She suddenly looked around and sighed in exasperation. When she spoke up again, her voice was softer. "Look, I'm sorry, Paul, but I'm really hoping this test comes back negative." She grabbed the test from my hand. "Let's just go pay for this." We headed to the pharmacy cash register and paid for the test, then walked through the store in silence. As we got to the front of the store, she headed toward the bathroom.

"Wait, you're going to do the test here? In the store?" I asked.

"I just need to know," she said, and continued on her way. I followed along behind her without a word.

"Julie, wait," I said, just before she left to go take the test. She turned around and stared at me expectantly.

"Whatever happens, we'll get through it, okay?" She didn't say anything, simply nodded and walked into the restroom. Time seemed to slow to a crawl. I leaned against the wall outside the bathroom and waited. My thoughts were running wild. Part of me wanted the test to come back negative for her sake, but another part of me wanted to raise a child with her. There was nothing I could do at that point except wait for her to come out, though. When she finally did a few minutes later, she was smiling from ear to ear.

“The test came back negative! I’m not pregnant!” she said, jubilant. My heart sank, and for a moment, I said nothing, but I quickly forced a smile for her sake.

“That’s great,” I said, and moved in for an embrace. She hugged me tightly and kissed me on the cheek. After we separated, she looked down at the ground again.

“To be honest, I’m relieved, but I—I’m sorry that it’s not what you wanted Paul.” She looked back up at me. “Are you going to be okay?” I wondered that myself, but when I saw the heartfelt look of concern on Julie’s face, I knew in that moment that I had to be, for her sake. I nodded.

“Don’t worry about me. Let’s get home. It’s been a long day,” We came out of the store to find that the storm from earlier had let up. Sunlight crept through the gaps in the silver clouds above us. Julie looked over at me and smiled.

“Looks like the sun’s finally out, too! Good news all around, yeah?” After a moment, I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said, taking her hand. As we started to walk hand in hand back toward the bus stop, I felt a few stray drops of rain fall onto me. “Good news all around.”

The first of these is the fact that the system is not a simple one.

It is a complex one, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.

It is a system that is not easily understood, and it is one that is not easily understood.